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THE CIA SCALPEL CUT DEEP By

Kenneth Barton Osborn is a 30-year-old political analyst who joined the Army in 1966 and spent about a year and a half in South Vietnam. He worked under civilian cover as a pacification officer but was actually assigned by Army Military Intelligence to operate nets of secret agents in the countryside near Da Nang. To strengthen his operation, Bart Osborn made a deal: CIA funds and technical support in exchange for his spies' information—which was, he later learned, fed into the CIA's infamous Phoenix program. His account:

The Phoenix program was set up under CIA control after the 1968 Tet offensive killed Washington's last hope of a military solution in Vietnam. It was supposed to be a neutralization program "to win the hearts and minds of the people"—if possible, by persuasion; if necessary, by other means. "Grab 'em by the balls," the saying went, "and their hearts and minds will follow." The CIA program was described as the scalpel instead of the bludgeon, but the scalpel cut deep. William E. Colby, who set up Phoenix and has since become director of Central Intelligence, has admitted that under Phoenix more than 20,000 Vietnamese were killed by CIA-directed murder teams on the assumption that the victims were Viet Cong. He has also admitted that the CIA often had no valid evidence on which to base that assumption. When he was pressed, Colby said no, he wouldn't want to see the American people treated the way the Vietnamese were treated by the Phoenix program. But he excused what happened by saying it was an "emergency situation."

When I arrived in Da Nang, I was 21, a very green E-3 with no knowledge of Vietnamese language, history, customs, anything. Nevertheless, I was immediately put in charge of a network of Vietnamese secret agents and told to gather information on which people's lives depended.

My operation was small to begin with: six agents, one cell. Most of the agents were people whose livelihood had been wiped out by the war. They spied because they were desperate for money. I had absolutely no way of knowing that the people they named as Viet Cong were really Viet Cong: A spy might finger a man to whom he owed money or with whom he'd quarreled over a woman. When a name came in, I just sent it through channels.

One of my biggest problems in the early days was money. Military Intelligence had a very tight budget, and sometimes at the end of the week I didn't have enough money to pay my agents. I found myself giving out C rations and even making up the difference out of my own pocket, which hurt; and, besides, it definitely damaged my rapport with my agents when I had to pay them shit prices. So I ran over the list of outfits that used the intelligence I was producing, wondering if some of them might not be willing to pay a little extra for what they were getting. I came across one name that puzzled me, that of the Phoenix Coordinator Office. After asking around, I found out that the office was in Da Nang and that it was run by the CIA, so I stopped by. I told the CIA people what I had in the way of a spy network. They asked me what I needed. I said I needed safe houses for debriefing, air and ground transportation, including access to Air America, also money for agent payments. They said fine, they'd trade. From then on, most of my operations were funded by the CIA and I was able to expand them to include 45 agents.

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I didn't know at first how the information gathered by my agents was being used; but, since Military Intelligence required me to prove that its money had been well spent, I began to send out questionnaires to the outfits that were receiving my reports. I discovered very quickly that my information was acted upon with vehemence. One of the questionnaires I got back informed me that because one of my agents had reported that there was one Viet Cong in a certain village, that entire village had been obliterated by a B-52 strike. Other questionnaires revealed that on the evidence of informers such as mine, thousands of Vietnamese were being hunted down by Provincial Reconnaissance Units. These PRU teams were gangs of reformed Viet Cong and ex-convicts who were given monthly assassination quotas by the CIA. The body-count mentality was at its height then.

Along with the PRU teams, the CIA set up Provincial Interrogation Centers where the people being turned in by spies could be held and questioned. I visited one such center operated by U.S. Marines in the Da Nang area. I saw two men dragging a dead body away. It was the man I'd turned in, or what was left of him. There was blood all over his head and part of a six-inch dowel was sticking out of his ear. The Marines who had been torturing him looked a little sheepish, but they were also disgusted because the man had died before they could get him to confess.

On two occasions, I accompanied a Marine interrogation team and two suspects on a helicopter flight. One of the suspects had already been tortured until he was a gasping wreck. The other suspect was a man whose name had been on my list. When the chopper had reached a good height, maybe 500 feet, the Marines began beating the prisoner who had already been tortured, threatening to throw him out of the plane if he didn't talk. When the man refused, they did exactly what they had said they would do. They winged him out of the chopper. All this, of course, had been staged for the benefit of the second prisoner, and you can imagine the effect it had. For the next 20 minutes, until he got safely back to earth, he blabbed everything he knew and probably a lot of things he didn't—anything to keep from being thrown out of that chopper.

The CIA, of course, claims that what the interrogators did was their own business. But the fact is that the CIA ran the entire Phoenix program, including the Provincial Interrogation Centers and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units. Director Colby, under oath, has stated that he had no direct knowledge of the operational methods of the PRU, but a former Marine officer named David Harrington has also testified under oath that he was present when a CIA officer named Harry Mustakos, who was in charge of the PRU teams in I Corps, briefed Colby in detail about the problems he had in keeping the gangs in line. Even after the Phoenix program, as such, was discontinued, the CIA persisted in running assassination operations under other names: first F-6, then SPIS, Special Police Investigative Service.

That's the main point. These things keep going on. Since Watergate and the end of our Vietnamese intervention, we want to believe everything's all right, all cleaned up. But Watergate and the other things we've seen so far were not aberrations. They are part of a pattern, just the tip of the iceberg. There *are* icebergs, and we are the Titanic.

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